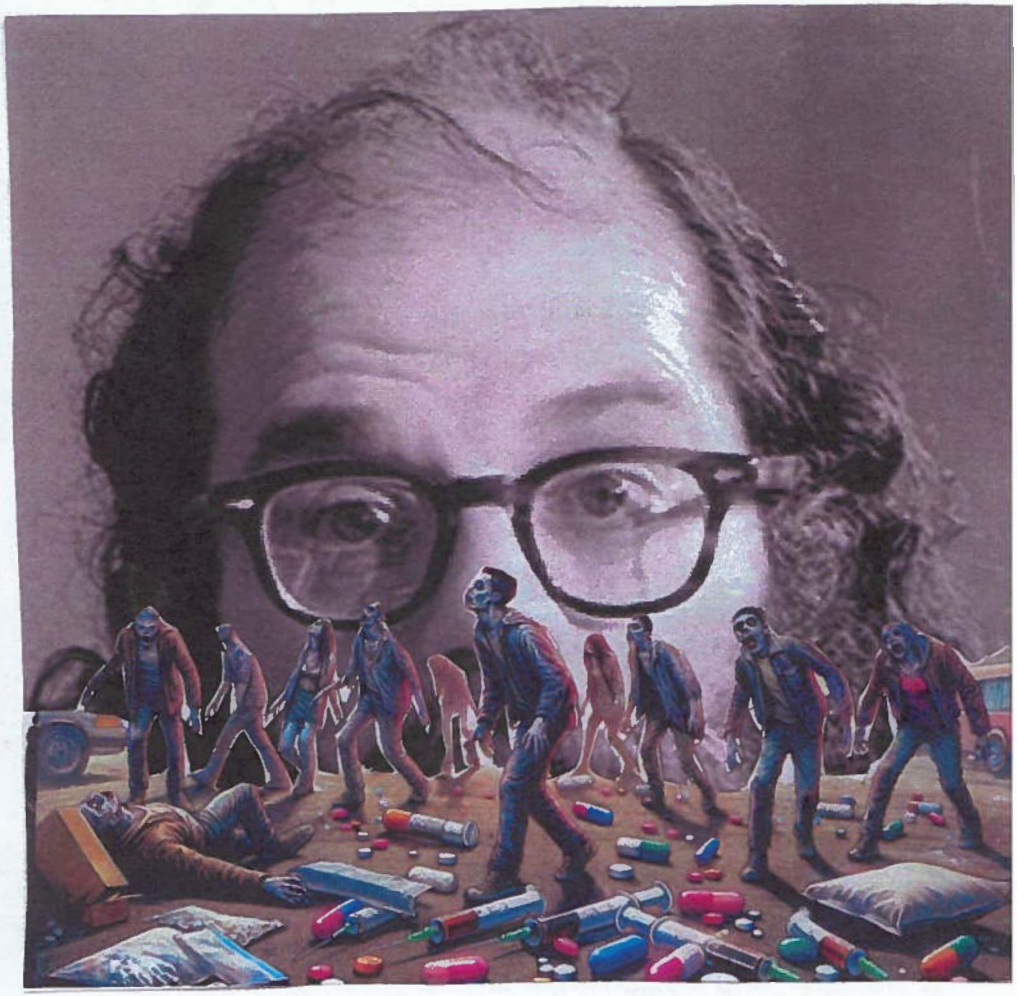
ZOMBIE ATTACK BOOK



CHAPTER ONE: THE GINSBERGS

Years ago, when I lived in San Francisco, I stood on a corner waiting to cross the street. As I stood there, I noticed an old VW bus puttering toward me. As it passed by, I noticed it was filled with hipsters of the shaggy hair, horn-rimmed glasses, English professor Math Rock nerd variety. Initially, I mistook the entire carload for a group of Allen Ginsbergs from varying years, two with no beards and stylish hair, two with wild beads and balding heads. All conspicuously bespectled.

This fleeting sight got me thinking about where a group of Allen Ginsberg cosplayers might be headed. Was there a meetup at Vesuvius? Was there an underground scene of beat author impersonators that gathered to guzzle wine, shoot junk, and read prose to each other? And, if there was, how could I join?

As these thoughts about the fantasy world of Beat impersonators grew wilder, evolving from imagined gatherings in the City Lights loft to packs of wasteland survivors battling a zombie apocalypse, I realized there was a short story here. That idea clicked fully when I got home and reread HOWL—it struck me that the poem could just as easily narrate a zombie apocalypse.

I only encountered Allen Ginsberg once. It was the mid-1990s, and I was living in Chelsea, NYC. Before the neighborhood went art gallery chic, it was known for the meatpacking-factory-dance clubs and a robust gay leather scene.

I was eating in a restaurant called Bendix, which served as an all-purpose diner of sorts, a modern lunch counter for the neighborhood. Anyway, one day, I am eating breakfast, and behind me is this horribly loud, disheveled old man, in a filthy white t-shirt and stained khaki shorts, yelling about ASCAP royalties. "How much more do I have to work?" he whined, "Fame doesn't pay the rent." On and on he went. Growing more frustrated and annoying. I couldn't enjoy my eggs.

As he got up to leave. I turned to get a good look at this sniveling man-baby crying to his friend about money all breakfast long. It was Allen Ginsberg. He pulled at his beard and smoothed his hand over his bald head, then shuffled out, his friend having paid the bill.

Later, back in San Francisco, I met a photographer from the Village Voice who was embedded in the Candy Kid nightclub scene with Michael Musto. He told me he often attended Ginsberg and Orlovsky's parties, but would leave when Ginsberg started pushing the beds together and disrobing.

It's never the ones you want it to be.

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I saw the best minds of my generation eaten by
mad, starving hysterical naked zombies
dragging themselves through the smoldering streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
- HOWL, 1956.

1.

The end of the world was downright evangelical. The oceans turned to fire, the skies were blocks of ice, and the earth ejected corpses. The whole affair was real Revelation-style smite - a fundamentalist's wet dream. Only the faithful weren't raptured. Unless by "raptured" you mean slaughtered by the mass of horrible zombies. The zombies were really, very nasty. And mean. They crawled and scooted and teetered as they searched for their next living meal.

The whole affair from first encounter to last stand happened in under a year. Closer to six months. The world went up like a kid magician's piece of flash paper.

Soon after that, I met the other Ginsbergs.

2.

Allen '53's hair looked wet. Salon styled, slick. He was a picture of 1953 Ginsberg standing on a rooftop in New York City. He refused to roll down the back seat window. A rolled-up window was prudent when the car crept around city blocks at a strolling pace, but now, on an open road, the needle popped at the red line, that rolled-up window was just a dick move.

I suspected, but never asked, it was only about the hair – greased in a perfect poofy bouffant.

Allen '68 pulled off the road.

It was late Tuesday afternoon, and we were parked in the middle of a gas station island for about half an hour. Allen '68 leaned over a fold-out map draped over the car's hood.

Allen '82 emerged from the gas station's convenience store, "Pump's on!"

Allen '53 grabbed the nozzle to let forth a gush of gasoline that spilled over the sides of our various containers and plastic tubs.

I ran my fingers over my bald head and pulled at my dyed gray and black beard. I stared out over the brown fields across the two-lane blacktop. I tapped a cigarette against the dented side of my lighter.

I lit the cigarette, then took two steps toward the field. I drew the smoke deep and listened. Then I saw them, a line of three tractors that guzzled toward us, a dust wave crested at their empty hitches.

"Company," I growled.

"What did you say?" Allen '68 shouted.

"Company," I said again.

The exhaled smoke swirled through the nest of overgrown hair covering my ears. I turned toward the other Allens, and I pointed over my shoulder to the yellow tractors that crawled over the field.

Allen '82 slid his black plastic-rimmed glasses to his forehead, lifted the binoculars to his naked gray eyes, pursed his lips, then frowned. He lowered the binoculars and took his glasses off his face. He pulled out a yellowish handkerchief and began cleaning the lenses. He stood and leaned against the car. Casual. Perfect.

"Lennons," he said.

"Johns or Vladimirs?" Allen '68 asked.

"The Beatle," Allen '82 sighed, "They got Brownings, though and this might be their gas."

"Really?" Allen '53 said and slammed the trunk.

The sun was setting, and the orange dusk darkened and brightened everything. The tractors growled to a stop, fifty or sixty feet from the road. The four of us stood fanned across the road's yellow dividing line. We held our weapons at the ready. Displayed, not aimed.

The Lennons had an impressive array. The Lennons' farm tractors were modified with cages, metal sheeting, and a bright Bob Mackie-inspired yellow paint job. Each tractor was equipped with an increasingly powerful ordinance. The Lennons had bigger guns than Jesus.

A skinny guy with long, straight, and greasy hair, which perfectly framed his face, emerged from the side of the leading tractor. He adjusted his little round wire-rimmed sunglasses. He looked at us, pinched at the front of his white ringed NYC t-shirt, then climbed to the top of the cab. He stood with his arms crossed, in a perfect imitation of that iconic John Lennon photograph. His posture was perfect.

We were impressed.

"How goes it, Lennons?" Allen '68 asked.

The lead Lennon nodded and said something into a small walkie-talkie. The wide-barreled anti-tank guns, mounted on the tractors, went limp. I swear I heard a disappointed sigh from deep inside their repurposed metal.

The lead Lennon motioned for our leader to approach. Even though I was certain it was not my turn to go, I released the grip of the gun slung across my chest and stepped forward.

The lead Lennon and I stood face to face. He reached into his back pocket to pull out a perfect crumpled cigarette pack.

"Good to meet you, guys," Lennon said in a bad Scouse accent, which sounded mainly like Midwestern De Niro.

He snapped the cigarette pack on the back of his hand. His thin index finger and thumb pinched the pack hard. He brought the pack up, and two cigarettes, filters up, slid out of it. He held it out to me with a little wave. He practiced this move a lot.

"Don't smoke," I lied.

"Smart. You'll live longer," he smiled.

"Heard about what you guys did in Salt Lake," he exhaled a flawless straight plume of smoke into the air, "Damn impressive."

"We got lucky," I pinched my earlobe.

"Should we all be so lucky as to have the luck of the Ginsbergs," he said.

"It's a beautiful dream, this nightmare."

We both chuckled.

"So where you lads headed?"

"Greenwich Village. We hear they got some secure blocks up there. Real far out scene. Like gone."

"Heard about that, too," he shot me a look over his small wire glasses, "we did."

"Anything keeping you here, then?" I came off irritable, and it made him nervous. I've only been shot at by nervous people.

"Oh, you know - just a little compound, some farms," he thumbed behind him, "called PHANTOM V, if you can imagine that. Though mostly, we call it home."

"Sounds nice."

"You Ginsbergs are welcome to stay on for a bit, if you wish."

"That is a very tempting offer, but we have a schedule, you know."

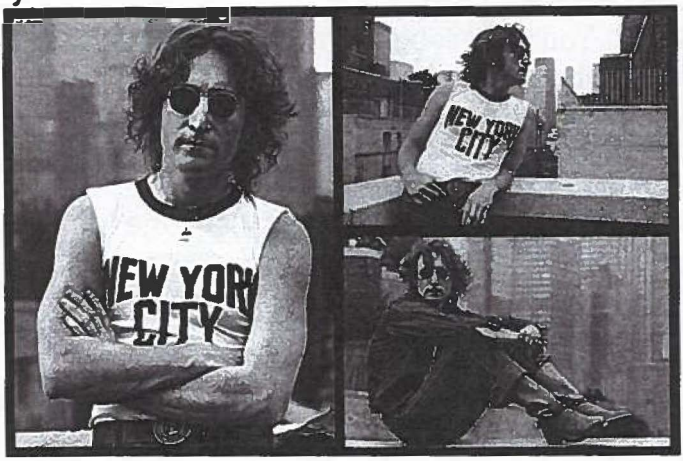
"Trains do have to run...," the lead Lennon said with a sadness that spoke less to what we lost than what we were forced to keep.

A few minutes later, the Lead Lennon flicked his cigarette butt off into the dirt field. It landed in a burst of sparks.

The Lennons churned up their tractors, honked a few times as they started the wide arc back toward their camp.

"They heard about Salt Lake," I said.

Allen'82 walked toward the car. Allen '68 watched him, "Oh yeah?"



3.

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagi-Nation?
- Howl, 1956

Three days later.

We stopped at a hospital. Always dangerous, always worth the risk.

It was morning, and a slight breeze came off the sea. The air smelled of salt and fish.

Allen '82 pulled the car up the loading dock. He perfectly positioned it near the doors. We locked, and we loaded.

Allen '68 superstitiously twisted his wooden prayer beads. I tapped the extra cartridge against the butt of my gun, then shoved it into my front pocket.

"Lessgo," Allen '82 shouted.

We spread like spilled mercury.

The loading dock doors were not barricaded. In fact, the place looked untouched. This strangeness put us all on edge.

I felt the other Allens share that moment of desperate relaxation, which swelled through us like it was the first day of a new school year.

We crept along slower than usual. We hugged the walls, guns pointed, nerves taut, and hands sweaty.

"Guys, I got a bad feeling about this," I said.

Allen '82 stooped down. He shouldered his rifle, squinted into the telescopic sight aimed down the hall.

Allen '53 groaned, then hunkered down and started to inch forward again.

Allen '68 ran point. He always went first. He stopped at the doors near the end of the hallway.

He thrust his fist into the air to order a full, immediate stop, as they did in action movies. I lifted my pistol and aimed at the doors.

We waited. The silence rang like a school bell in my head. Allen '68 slid his hand up the door; his gun followed. He pressed his shoulder against the door, and it swung wide open.

Nothing.

Another pristine corridor stretched on, anticipating the return of the doctors and patients.

Allen '68 let the doors swing shut, spun on his heel, and walked back toward us, his gun relaxed and lowered, "There is shitall here."

"This place smells like an airport."

"I bet the shelves are stocked," Allen '53 exhaled a deep lungful of cigarette smoke.

"Split up. Meet back at the car in half an hour," Allen '68 barked.

Fifteen minutes later, I leaned back on the metal ladder bolted to the naked concrete. I pushed my shoulder up against the roof access hatch. It squeaked and hissed as the rubber seal sucked apart.

The late-morning air swept down in a warm gush, smelling of daylight and tar. I emerged on the roof in a rolled embarrassment of agility. A glorious cloudless blue sky stretched above me. I leaned back on my forearms and marveled at the day.

I deliberately chose to be purposeless; I decided to scale to this height rather than scour lockers and offices for fungibles. I nursed the resentment at being outvoted. I wanted to bail on this place, and I still had that bad feeling.

I heard the soft report of rapid gunshots. Sporadic, then sustained, then continuous, then frantic.

I raced across the roof, hit the low wall with some force, and an immediate bruise grew across my hip. I leaned over the edge to look down the four stories at a real bad scene. Hundreds of skinny zombies moved toward our car.

I was disadvantaged. The roof's angle left no subtlety in any shot I tried. My fire landed wide or dangerously close. I was of no use to my friends at the car. So I fired blindly into the wave of monsters, slowed a few, but stopped none.

Allen '68 and Allen '53 opened up on the approaching horde. Allen '82 tried to get the car started, but I could hear the futile whirring clicks float under the popping gunfire and the hungry zombie moans. Then the first monster smacked the driver's side window.

Allen '82 panicked. He forced the door open. The zombie bounced backward. It fell back on stiff knees, then straight on its ass.

Allen '82 leaped over the monster's uplifted hands. He slipped along the side of the car, just as another creature lunged. It hooked onto Allen '82's backpack, which exploded like an addict's busted birthday piñata. Prescription bottles, cream tubes, and rolls of antiseptic bandages popped into the air like medical confetti.

Allen '82 was knocked off balance. He hit the concrete with a rattle, clawed at the ground as he tried to make it under the car, but the horde closed over him in a splatter of gore.

Allen '53 retreated to the shipping doors. He yelped meaninglessly for Allen '68. But when Allen '82 went down, Allen '68 jumped onto the hood of the car. Allen '68 fired carefully, then wildly, as he tried to keep the zombies off Allen '82.

Before he could fully react, Allen '68 was outflanked. He leaped to the roof of the car. Immediately, he was surrounded, then a few seconds later, swallowed.

Allen '53 had disappeared behind the closed shipping doors. In anger, I emptied a clip over the side of the roof. The monsters that fell were quick to rise again. I slumped against the wall, held my warm gun to my chest. I stared straight ahead, paralyzed by angry disbelief.

4.

Allen '53 stood hunched at the end of the hallway. He was wet. Wet like he stepped out of a sweat shower. His soaked clothes hung off him. His eyes were wild and wide, squinted without changing shape.

He started to speak, but instead of words, his lips squirted out a stream of bloody phlegm and dark saliva. Allen '53 quivered in the bright fluorescent light; joints twisted in unnatural spasm. The hole scratched across his jugular was just an open slit; it no longer spewed blood.

I lifted my pistol and shot him in the head. His horn-rimmed glasses snapped in two, each lens shot off in opposite directions. I watched as he slumped backward against the doors; his shoes squeaked as he slid to sit down on the floor.

5.

By my calculation, those monsters stomped around outside for nearly two months. Then they stood and waited. They oozed and dripped. I did not put much thought into it. I didn't spend much time checking on them. They made no attempt to get into the hospital.

Most of my time was spent preparing for the day the generator would conk out. I worked to reconfigure the insides of an ambulance. I put a chain link over the windows. I created a livable space with enough storage for a considerable fuel reserve. I lived on vending machine food

and nitrous. I stockpiled enough amphetamines to keep me awake for months.

One morning, I looked out the window, and most of the monsters were gone. A couple loitered around, but the horde had moved on.

"The migration habits of the North American Zombie," I scribbled on a dry-erase board in the corner of the office I used as my apartment. Later that day, or maybe the next day, the generator stopped.

After the hospital went dark, I spent two more nights. I burned the paper in a file cabinet for light and heat. It took a few hours to load up, then pulled out on the third afternoon. My plan was to continue with the plan – I headed for Greenwich Village.

The ambulance was a lot slower than our old car. I feared pushing it too hard. It was the only lifeline I had, my only chance. I needed to keep it running. I drove for a week or so. The interstate highways were clogged with wreckage and unstable bridges, so I used back roads.

Every day, around dusk, I pulled off the road and looked for a sheltered place to park. Somewhere far enough off the road to get a running start from whatever might come along. I ate sparingly and slept lightly.

It was a Wednesday when I pulled to the side of some cornfield access road. I sat with the back doors open and enjoyed a cold hot dog. A tiny whirlwind of dry husks and dust spun in the distance. I swore I had clear sight lines, so I was flabbergasted when I found myself surrounded.

A group of five skinny, pale men materialized out of a turnstile of wind. They stood in a semicircle around the ambulance, arms folded, in the loitering lean of disaffected cool. They all wore white shock wigs, precariously perched atop their own dark hair.

Two of them wore black ribbed turtlenecks, pinched at the elbows. The others donned black leather jackets like insect armor. They peered at me from behind wide lens glasses, cocked high on and perfectly fitted to their tiny faces.

I hopped down from the ambulance. I bit a chunk of hot dog, then lifted my.357 Magnum out of my shoulder holster. I held it low down by my hip.

"Warhols," I said.

The lead Andy Warhol stepped forward; he floated like a marionette. He did not breathe, nor did his marble eyes blink.

He said with the slightest deadpan twill, "Gosh, that is a nice ambulance."

"Thanks," I said.

"Wherever did you find it?" he asked, his hands never moving from his side.

"Made it myself," I said with a flirtatious smile, then took a bite of the hot dog.

"Goodness," the lead Warhol said in a soft breath, "It is quite good."

"Take a look inside, if you want."

"Gee, really?"

The Warhols sat in the back of the ambulance, perfectly erect, hands folded in their laps. I drove as the lead Andy gave me one-word directions. As we pulled up, I saw that the Warhols had been busy. They had repurposed school buses, sunk them up to their wheel wells in concrete, then covered one side in steel plating. The bus walls' hammered and dented metal circled a large courtyard encampment. A shanty town of hobbled-together structures, shacks, and treeless treehouses.

That night, I parked the ambulance in the middle of the Warhols' camp. It provided a marvelous novelty, constantly examined and boarded by drag queens with day-old beards and skinny women of indeterminate bruises. A few leather jacket hipsters sat on top of it, running the siren during static-laced guitar solos. Finally, a few of the more robust Warhols took paint brushes to the ambulance's side. Mostly, they repainted the existing graphics in new day-glo colors.

I sat with three of the Warhol elders around a large campfire. We ate tomato soup straight out of the can.

"Gosh, we are glad you are here," the lead Warhol said.

"Thanks."

"Where are you headed?" asked the middle Warhol.

"Mostly East. Mostly," I said.

"East is so nice," remarked the oldest-looking Warhol.

"Have you been to Pittsburgh?" asked another.

"Can't say that I have ever been to Pittsburgh," I said.

"Well, Pittsburgh has...everything."

I nodded. A few minutes passed in silence.

"You know who you kind of look like?" asked the oldest Warhol.

I did not look away from the fire, "Nope. Who?"

"Allen Ginsberg," he said, "You sort of look like Allen Ginsberg."

There was a pause as the others examined me in the firelight.

"Allen was such a great person and really great poet," Warhol said.

"Yeah, I guess he was," I said and smiled.

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